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Archaeology and Rock Art project in Ladakh

TEDAHL (Team for the Exploration and Documentation of the Archaeology and History of Ladakh) is a non-profit group registered in Switzerland. It develops projects and supports initiatives pertaining to the exploration, documentation and preservation of Ladakhi material culture. Ladakh, part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in northwest India, is a Himalayan region of Tibetan culture.

One of TEDAHL's projects is the MAFIL (Mission Archéologique Franco-Indienne au Ladakh, or Indo-French Archaeological Mission in Ladakh). *It is one of the rare cooperation projects between the Archaeological Survey of India and a foreign institution.* The project is in part financed by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Martin Vernier, an independent Swiss scholar of Ladakhi history and archaeology is the Joint Director of the project.

The area chosen for the project is the Nubra, the northernmost valley of Ladakh, bordering China and Pakistan. The role of the Nubra valley as an important gateway between India and Central Asia in recent history is well known. It was the main route for trans-Himalayan trade between Ladakh and Xinjiang (China).

Surveys conducted there between 2006 and 2011 by TEDAHL revealed the existence of lithic sites, rock art sites, fortified sites, Buddhist remains and funerary sites, which date back to over 5000 years. Therefore, the Nubra offers a wide variety of remains ranging from Prehistory to the Medieval period and hint at ancient links with Central Asia. The aim of the project is to better understand these links in building a chrono-cultural sequence of the valley.

Based on a first collaborative campaign in 2013, three sites have been short listed for study:



Martin Vernier in conversation with a village elder in Murgji village

- *Murgi*, which is the most important rock art site in Ladakh and probably dates back to the Bronze Age (between 5000 and 3000 years old). The carved images show strong links with the Central Asian world.
- *Tirishaw* which is one of the most ancient Buddhist complexes in the Nubra valley. Its study will give clues about the introduction of Buddhism in the area.
- *Deskit Tingang* which is one of the largest pre-Buddhist necropolises known in Ladakh. Excavations will reveal the cultural peculiarities of the valley.



Prospection in the Nubra valley

Over four years (2013-2016) this multidisciplinary project will bring together archaeologists (experts in prehistory, rock art, built architecture, anthropologists, etc.) and natural scientists (geologists, geomorphologists, geophysicists). Together, their studies will enable a complete understanding of the natural and cultural environment of the studied sites.

Numerous archaeological remains have been damaged due to a lack of information. Further losses could be prevented by providing information about the aims and means of archaeological research, patrimony conservation and the protection of historical sites in the local language.

To sensitise the local population, information leaflets have been prepared with the support of the Swiss Embassy in Delhi for distribution to the local population, village associations, schools and monasteries. Educational workshops, for the stakeholders in the study area, about the importance of conservation are also organised in the framework of the MAFIL project.

The Indian institutions involved in the project include *the Archaeological Survey of India (Delhi and Leh) and the Project for Indian Cultural Studies (Mumbai)*. The European institutions involved in the project include *the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (through the Commission Consultative des Recherches Archéologiques à l'Étranger), the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the East Asian Civilizations Centre (UMR8155/CRCAO) in Paris* as well as TEDAHL: The Team for the Exploration and Documentation of the Archaeology and History of Ladakh from Switzerland.

For more information on the project please visit <http://tedahl.org/>

Martin Vernier is one of the three founding members of TEDAHL, and has more than 20 years of experience in Ladakh through yearly visits there for survey-trekking in the whole area. He first went to Ladakh in 1986 and since then he has spent every summer in Ladakh and learnt the local dialect, customs and traditions. He has extensive knowledge of the culture, history and proto-history (his speciality being on the Local Rock Art heritage) of the area. As part of his Fine Arts studies as a painter and sculptor, he spent a year in Dharamsala to study traditional Tibetan artistic techniques. Since 1996, Mr. Vernier's work has focused on the historical and archaeological heritage of Ladakh. Laureate of a research grant from the Italo-Swiss Fondation Carlo Leone et Mariena Montandon, he spent two years exploring and systematically documenting the petroglyphs of the region. He created the first electronic database and published the first monograph on Ladakhi rock art. He now conducts research on the stone Buddhist steles and reliefs. As side occupation Martin Vernier leads every year cultural tours in the Himalayan regions for various European agencies with a sincere desire to share and impart his passion for this part of the world.

